

How Christianity Grew Out of Paganism




by

Joseph McCabe

See Sharp Press

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Paganism*



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Publisher's Note

During its day, the original publisher of this pamphlet, the Haldeman-Julius Company of Girard, Kansas, was the most important publisher of radical materials in the United States. From the founding of his company in 1919 until his early death in 1951, E. Haldeman-Julius published more than 2500 books and pamphlets.

One of Haldeman-Julius's most important and most prolific writers was Joseph McCabe, the author of this pamphlet. In regard to Christianity and, especially, Catholicism, McCabe was perhaps the most learned atheist writer who ever lived. This was a result of his native gifts and his background—he was a former Catholic priest, fluent in Latin and several other languages, who had taught philosophy and ecclesiastical history in a Catholic college. During his lifetime (1867–1956) he translated dozens of books and wrote hundreds of his own books and pamphlets, all on various aspects of history, and a great many on religious topics. Perhaps his most important work was *A Rationalist Encyclopedia*, published just after World War II, and of which he was editor.

How Christianity Grew Out of Paganism appeared in 1943, a time when McCabe was already in his mid 70s. The original edition of this work was one of the Haldeman-Julius "Little Blue Books"—3¼" X 4¾" pamphlets printed on very cheap paper and set in 8-point type. (This is 8-point type.) In most previous pamphlets in See Sharp's Haldeman-Julius reprint series, I took the type from the Little Blue Books and blew it up to 125% or 130% of original size. Unfortunately, *How Christianity Grew Out of Paganism* was so badly printed that I couldn't do that here. Instead, I've re-set the pamphlet in Bookman Old Style, a face that preserves, to an extent, the feel of the original. As well, I've reproduced here only the latter half of the original pamphlet, because the first half had nothing to do with the topic announced in the title.

—Chaz Bufe, May 12, 1998

How Christianity Grew Out of Paganism

How the Creed was Synthetically Formed

It is one of the ironies of the history of religion that what we call the great, historical, or organized religions took their rise from prophets whose mission in life was to denounce religion in the sense in which these organized bodies use the word. The very corrupt and hypocritical Buddhism of Japan and its less offensive but equally elaborate counterpart in China and other Asiatic countries takes the name of a moralist, Buddha, who was, according to all the leading authorities, an atheist and urgently warned folk to keep clear of priests, temples, and idle speculations about a future life. The vast army of Buddhist priests and monks, the most sordid priesthood in the modern world, now make a gorgeous living chiefly by inspiring simple folk for the next world.

I do not include Confucianism because it never was a religion and it has therefore consistently preserved the atheism and high moral code of its founder. Taoism, the second religion of China, pretends to have been founded by Lao-tse, a contemporary of Confucius, who, though inclined to mysticism, equally warned his followers against organized religion with its ceremonies and devil-dodging. What is broadly called Zoroastrianism in Persia takes the name of another prophet, Zoroaster or Zarathustra who set out to purify religion by stripping it of all that the modern Zoroastrians call religion. Even Mohammed was a rebel against all organized and priestly religion, yet Islam, while rejecting the title of priests and remaining comparatively simple in its services, really has a powerful and tyrannical body of priests.

But the most notable instance of this, shall we say, ingenuous development in the religious world is Christianity. As I said, if there is one thing that we may on sound historical principles consider probable about Jesus it is that he was an independent moral preacher—as hundreds of the Essenes were in Judea at the time—who so angered the Jewish priests, presumably by his criticisms of them and their temple-religion, that they had him put to death as

what we now call a Bolshevik. When that fine leader of the French Revolution Camille Desmoulins was asked his religion, he said: "The same as that of the sans-culotte Jesus." If you want me to give the proper American equivalent of the French expression, I shall have to paraphrase it: "ragged-seat-of-the-pants." Fortunately, we have no quarrel here with those who think that the gospels are real biography. Except for a ridiculous, late interpolation about his "church," they uniformly represented Jesus as a violent opponent of priests, temples, services, set prayers, and every element of sacerdotal and ritual religion. Paul has the same idea.

We have nothing to do here with modern explanations of how or why this iconoclastic gospel, which is still read in Church (in the midst of the most gorgeous and elaborate ceremonies) every Sunday, became the basis of the Episcopal or the Roman Church. One of the funniest explanations, which you often hear today, is that Jesus took his fishermen-lieutenants up one of those high mountains of which he was so fond and explained to them that he "spoke in parables to the multitude so that they would not understand"—in the next page you read that he spoke to the multitude in parables because it was the simplest and most beautiful way to get his ideas over to them—but he would tell them something. What he said to the people about an approaching end of the world was—well, anything you like to call it. The world was going to last for thousands of years, and for security of Christian morality they must found a great church with buildings and choirs (including soprano-eunuchs), bishops, archbishops, cardinals, priests, etc., vestments, incense, and dog-collars, the power to kill heretics and dictate to princes and presidents. . . . Tens of millions of Christians believe that. But there is no need for any guessing about what happened. Early Christian literature makes it clear. In one of the most important, yet one of the least frequently quoted documents, of the first century is a "Letter from the Christians of Rome to those of Corinth," which we may confidently date about the year 96. That "Letter to the Corinthians" says that the Romans have just simple meetings—in each other's houses, for we know that they had no sort of chapel until after 200 A.D.—at which they said prayers and sang a hymn (probably Jewish) or two. To keep order they had an overseer (which in Greek is the word we have corrupted into bishop) and a few assistants (deacons). The Letter says nothing about priests, who were pagan officials, much less a Pope. Pliny's letter to the Emperor about Christians in Bithynia suggests the same simplicity.

Before the end of the 2nd century, the simple supper they had periodically held had grown into "the Mass," and the priests who performed this very August ceremony were, of course, a special and consecrated caste. The word Mass is taken from a Latin phrase which the priest still addresses to the people at the end of the ceremony. It means, "off you go: dismissal." Now we know that in ancient Rome this formula was used (in Greek) at the end of the service in the temples of Mithra and of Isis, and the temple of Mithra particularly interests us. At Rome it was almost next door to the Christian quarter and it was a fierce rival. To be brief, if you will look up the English translation (*The Mysteries of up the Mithra*, 1903) of the smaller work on Mithraism of F. Cumont, the highest authority on the subject, you will find that in the underground temples of Mithra, blazing with candles and stuffy with incense, priests in vestments consecrating bread and wine at an altar and communicating them to the people. The evolution of the Mass out of the Lord's Supper is clear enough, and it gave a mighty lift to the priestly caste over the laity.

The Christians still, and until the 4th Century, refused to celebrate Christmas . . . or pay any honor to Mary. The reason again is clear. All the pagan religions celebrated either one or the other or both. If you want the details and the references in the writings of the Fathers, I must refer you to my Little Blue Books 1102 and 1104, since I must confine myself here to an outline.

Take Mithraism. The simple-minded Christian Father Firmicus Maternus says candidly—he explains that it is all a trick of the devil to seduce Christian—that Cumont has verified from the inscriptions that Mithra was a Savior God who brought "eternal life" to his votaries (especially through baptism and communion). They celebrated his birth in a cave, with great pomp and blaze of lights, at midnight (Midnight Mass) December 25th—the date when the Romans themselves celebrated "The Birthday of the Unconquered Sun"; and Mithra was a solar god. In the spring they celebrated the death and resurrection of Mithra with equal solemnity, as Firmicus describes in detail. The image of the dead god was exhibited on a bier in the temple and the worshipers mourned. Then—Firmicus does not say how long the mourning lasted—the priests bade them rejoice for the god had risen again.

In another part of Rome was the temple of Isis, and the early Christian Paschal Chronicle tells us that in mid-winter the temple of Isis used to exhibit a sort of tableau (as Catholic churches still do at Christmas) of the mother Isis and her newborn divine child,

Horus, lying in a manger. The Greeks at the same time made great parade of their god Dionysos (or Bacchus) represented by the statue of a newborn infant lying in a basket (some say manger). At Alexandria, another early Christian writer tells us, there was a cult of a virgin-mother Kore, who was particularly honored as giving birth to a divine child in mid-winter. In other words, since these Greek, Persian, and Egyptian religions had temples in all cities, and December 25th was a gold-letter day in the Roman calendar as the birthday (virtually the resurrection) of the sun, there is not much doubt how the simple early Christian religion came (when it suppressed all its rivals by force) to have its most popular and characteristic festival and its cult of a virgin-mother and divine babe.

But the celebration of the death and resurrection of a god was even more familiar to the Greeks and Romans. I have told how the Mithraists, who were for three centuries more numerous than the Christians and spread from Persia to Britain, celebrated annually the death and resurrection of their god. Even more familiar to the Romans was the annual celebration of the violent death and resurrection of Athis, son of the Great Mother (Cybele), because the devotees were permitted to hold their picturesque processions in the streets. The ceremonies lasted a week, which is very clearly the model of the later Holy Week. St. Augustine saw them in Rome and described them. It is enough here to say that on the first day the priests carried reeds (compare palms) in procession; the fifth day—remember that Good Friday is the fifth day from Palm Sunday—was “the Day of Blood,” when the eunuch-priests gashed themselves with knives (in the East they publicly emasculated themselves) and howled as they bore a statue of the dead young god bound on a pine tree; and the last day was the Day of Rejoicing because he had come to life again. All over the East that was one of the most famous religious ceremonies, the god being variously called Athis, Adonis, and Tammuz. The prophet Ezekiel (VIII, 15) refers to it: “And behold there sat women weeping over Tammuz,” and as late as the 4th Century, Jerome, Augustine, Cyril, and other Church Fathers speak of it.

This covers most of the ancient world, from Rome to Mesopotamia, but the Egyptians had another version of what we may almost call the universal myth. Firmicus says that “they buried a statue of Osiris in the temple and honored it with an annual lamentation,” and a few days later “they lay aside their grief and rejoiced.” Frazer’s masterly *Adonis*, *Attis*, *Osiris* will give you all

details. And—to complete the circle of the ancient world—the Greeks, besides having a legend (Demetese Persophone) of their own that comes near to the common myth, borrowed the mourning festivals over both Osiris and Tammuz (Attis). Plutarch describes them holding the ceremony as early as 415 B.C. (*Alcibiades*, XV111), and the Roman writer Ammianus Marcellinus (*Resgestal*, XXII) describes it, in Antioch, in 362 A.D.

The birth, death, and resurrection of a god, which simple-minded believers imagine to be so characteristic of Christianity, were almost as familiar in the Greek-Roman world for two or three hundred years before Christ as the Fourth of July is in America. There is not the least obscurity about the matter. In mid-winter, the sun begins to wax strong again and, as the Roman writer Macrobius says, these temple-representations of the birth (obviously rebirth or resurrection) of a divine infant refer to the solar deity (Mittra, Horus, etc.). At the beginning of winter the spirit of vegetation, the divine son of mother-earth, is stricken and dies. It is interesting that often in the myth and ceremony he dies by losing his testicles or penis, figuring the earth's loss of fertility. But he rises to full vitality again in the spring. On these great phenomena of the year, pre-civilized man built his winter and spring nature festivals and, for convenience and greater effect, later priests compressed the death and resurrection festivals into three days.

These are by no means all the cults of the ancient world that influenced Christianity. The city of Tarsus had . . . its own god Sandan, who died and rose again annually. Late Babylonia and Phoenicia had a savior-god, Esmun, whose cult could give spiritual features to the new religion. But what I have said will suffice to illustrate how the austere creed of Paul, which was developed out of late Jewish ideas of what the Messiah was to do for them, and the still simpler religion ascribed to Jesus in the gospels, once it won power to stay all its rivals by imperial decrees, borrowed their myths and services, their art and temple-paraphernalia (vestments, incense, holy water, etc.), and attracted the old pagan worshipers.

The Facts About Early Christianity

For several centuries . . . the early Christians, especially those who lived in the 1st century after the death of Jesus, would have none of these pagan robes and trimmings. Paul was the real founder of this early Church, and his grim spirit haunted it for a century. But a change occurred before the second century was out, and the

myth that for several centuries these early Christians remained shining examples of virtue in a wicked world, ready at all times to sit on red-hot gridirons or meekly face the lions for their faith, is another element that must be set aside if you want to get a correct attitude to Christianity. It is the first point to which those who talk about our Christian civilization would appeal, and it has to be flatly and comprehensively denied.

Although, as Paul's letters to the Corinthians plainly tell, some of the new communities were by no means solid in virtue, we are pleased to learn from his other letters and from the letter of the Romans to the Corinthians that the latter community was exceptional; and it must have been particularly difficult to sustain the Christian sex-code in gay Corinth. Anyhow, we find the Roman Christians still virtuous in the year 96 A.D. You may, of course, suggest that if they expected the end of the world at any moment and the alternatives being an eternity in boiling oil or amongst cool clouds, it ought not to have been difficult for a man to be satisfied with one bed; but we have nothing to do with those things. Temptation was, as a matter of fact, not as alluring in the early Church at Rome as the preachers seem to think. Apparently they do not know that the Christians did not live in Rome at all but outside the walls in a poor foreign settlement, and that their language was Greek. On the other hand, the common picture of them as a communistic body is a libel. I say libel, because this would bring them into line with those dreadful Bolsheviks. Some of them were rich and some poor. Some had slaves and some were slaves. Paul sends his kind regards to two of them who were high officials in the imperial palace, and later Christian historians claim that the community included cousins of the Emperor Vespasian.

But the luster of their virtue was very much dimmed before the end of the 2nd century. A learned man arose in the Christian Roman community—the only one in six or seven centuries—and, as he is a "saint" in the Roman calendar, we must read him with respect. In his *Refutation of All Heresies*, this Hippolytus has a few chatty pages about the life of the Roman Christians. Pope Victor, the first pope who tried to be papal and got very nastily rapped on the knuckles by the other bishops, was, it seems, a friend of a lady named Marcia, who lived in the Emperor Commodus's palace. Not to put too fine a point on it, Marcia was the lewdest concubine in the spacious harem (which also included 300 handsome boys) of Commodus, who could have given lessons to Nero in sex matters. However Marcia and her friend and tutor in vice, Hyacinth, who is claimed to have been a

Christian, got many favors for the Christians when Pope Victor went for tea or something to the palace.

Hippolytus broadens the picture. One of the rich Christians directs his Christian slave Callistus to open a bank in the city, and the faithful, although the Christian code declared all interest on money to be usury and a mortal sin, all rushed to put their money in it and make a bit. Callistus embezzled the lot and went to jail, and a few years later he became Pope and applied his talents to the humanization (and enrichment) of the Church. It was, he said, time they abolished this musty old idea that if a Christian sinned after baptism he or she must be expelled and considered damned forever. He and his priests could forgive sins, he said. So by this and other humane measures he opened the door of the church to rich Roman women, and they brought in a good many things besides money. In fact, anybody who represents the Roman community after this time as an oasis of virtue in a desert of sin ought to be on the staff of a Ministry of Information.

Documents of the 3rd century show that the dry rot spread quickly and very thoroughly to the whole Church. About the middle of the century, St. Cyprian, a very stern man, was leader of the African Church, and his letters to the pope describe how a large part of his clergy and bishops were unmitigated scoundrels: fornication, murder, embezzlement, and all the rest of it. For the Spanish Church, we have, about the end of the century, the canons, and, my word, the women were as gay as the cigar-girls of modern Seville. For the East, we have a letter (in Bishop Eusebius's *History*) of the bishop of the place describing the behavior by the Christians of Alexandria when the general persecution opened. With mordant irony, the bishop describes how, when his Christians were summoned to the tribunal, they provoked the jeers of the crowd by nervously disowning the faith. Of course the bishop himself, being a very necessary person, had had to avoid martyrdom.

This question of martyrdoms gives you a general indication of the character of the Christians of the 3rd century, when the only two real general persecutions of Christians occurred, and at the same time gives you the measure of the fairy tales that are still told about the early Church—told, that is to say, to the people and cherished by politicians, and editorial writers, though Catholic scholars who have specialized in martyr literature (the Jesuit Father Delehaye, the Austrian Professor Ehrhard, Bishop Gregg, etc.) have to admit that it is the finest Collection of forgeries that we have. For instance, Catholic historians claim that by the middle of the 3rd century,

when the Decian Persecution occurred, the Roman Christians, numbered about 30,000 or more. But in his special study of this persecution, Bishop Gregg finds that only half a dozen of them won the golden crown of martyrdom. Of about 150 priests and clerics of the Church, only six were arrested. And in the next and greatest general persecution, under Diocletian, the Catholic historian Duchesne can find only a score of genuine martyrdoms in the whole Church, and only two of these were at Rome.

The African very orthodox Bishop Optatus has a pleasant little story about what happened in his *History of the Donetist Schism* (of the 4th century). A bunch of the African bishops met to discuss the appalling general apostasy of their Christians when the persecution was over. They fell to violent quarreling and it transpired that they had all dodged the golden crown. One had, presumably with a wink at the presiding pagan official who was bribed, handed in a medical work pretending that it was the Bible. Another of the bishops was accused by his brothers in Christ of murders. "Yes," he said—and Optatus is copying a stenographic report of the proceedings, "I did, and I'll knock off anybody who gets in my way." In short, modern experts on this literature find that only a few dozen of the supposed "acts" (accounts of trial and execution) of the martyrs are not blatant forgeries, and beyond these we just have the vague reports of local bishops that a number of the more zealous of their people—generally enthusiasts who regarded martyrdom as a sure ticket to paradise—were executed. Delehaye has shown in a special study that all stories of Christians being exposed to lions in the Roman Amphitheater (which so moved Mr. G.B. Shaw that he based a play on them) are bogus. Of three generations of Christians in the 3rd century—certainly at least six or seven millions—only a hundred or two did not deny the faith or take to flight; and the learned Origen himself says that for the first two centuries you could count the martyrs on your fingers.

That will give you some idea of the colossal fabrication of the early Middle Ages on which the first part of the myth of our Christian civilization—the character of the early Church—is based. Naturally the corruption deepened when, after the conversion of the Emperor Constantine, the Church became rich. The legend is that the Christians were now able to build churches in Rome and attract the pagans by their virtuous lives. Let me state, very briefly, three notorious facts.

In the year 366 there was an election for the Papacy, which was now very rich. The successful candidate was "St." Damasus, and his

methods were such that in one day his men left the corpses of 160 of his rival's supporters on the floor of a small church. The war lasted a week and was so furious that the Roman "police" were swept aside and the prefect driven out of the city. The second fact is that St. Jerome, who then lived in Rome as a sort of secretary to Pope Damasus, has left us a large number of letters in which he describes the character of the Christians of Rome. In almost incredible language, he insists that clergy, monks, consecrated virgins, widows, etc., are monstrously and, with very few exceptions, comprehensively corrupt. "St." Damasus himself was denounced by his priests to the civil power for adultery, and was only saved by the emperor. And the third undisputed fact is that there was no "attraction" of the pagans at all. In the extant Theodosian Code we have ten decrees which the bishops got from the emperors suppressing all rival religions and sects under pain of fine, imprisonment, or death.

The corruption of character was general in the Church. St. Augustine in his sermons and letters describes it in North Africa, which was then more flourishing and populous than it now is. St. John Chrysostom in his sermons paints an equally dark picture of the people of Constantinople and Antioch. At Antioch, he says, there are 100,000 Christians but he doubts if 100 of them will ever see heaven. They laugh, he says, when he preaches on chastity. St. Gregory of Nyssa in two extant letters forbids Christian women of his diocese to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem because it is, he says, a hotbed of crime and vice. And so on. The Christian world was sinking into the Dark Age in which not only all attempts at restoring the shattered Greek-Roman civilization were suspended for seven centuries, but Europe fell to a level which most historians describe as barbarism.

That is [but] part of the reply to those who glibly talk about our Christian civilization. In its primitive purity Christianity was, like Paul and (possibly) Jesus, quite indifferent to what we call civilization.

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**This pamphlet briefly but
thoroughly shows how christianity
adopted virtually all of its central
myths and ceremonies directly
from pagan religions.**